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AUTHOR	Briere, Eugene J.
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ABSTRACT

This brochure contains a summary of an English language testing project being developed by the University of Southern California under the aegis of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). Previous attempts (Stanford Achievement Test, California Achievement Test) have failed to test American Indian children's performance in reading, vocabulary, and language because these tests are not designed to measure linguistic skills. The norms and standards of such tests are derived from populations far different from the American Indian children in BIA schools, many of whom are either non-English speaking, or seriously deficient in English. The major objectives of this Project are to develop a battery of tests consisting of three parts: (1) three oral-aural techniques to measure proficiency in perception and production of spoken English, (2) two techniques for testing proficiency in listening comprehension, and (3) a paper and pencil test designed to measure the level of proficiency in written English grammar. Although not specifically within the scope of this three-year project, it is felt that the testing instruments being developed will be of great use in assessing proficiency in English for other non-English speaking groups. Direct inquiries to Author, or to Assistant Commissioner for Education, BIA, 1951 Constitution Ave. NW, Washington, D.C. 20242. (AMM)

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ENGLISH LANGUAGE TESTING PROJECT

FOR

THE BUREAU OF INDIAN AFFAIRS

This brochure contains a summary of a project being developed by the University of Southern California, Dr. Eugene Briere, Professor of Linguistics. Those desiring detailed information regarding the report may direct their inquiry to Dr. Briere or to:

Assistant Commissioner for Education

Bureau of Indian Affairs

1951 Constitution Avenue, N.W.

Washington, D. C. 20242

Attention: Curriculum Division

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English Language Testing Project

2140 Westwood Blvd., Los Angeles, California 90024

Director Dr. Eugène J. Brière
Associate Professor of Linguistics
University of Southern California

☐ INTRODUCTION

There is an ever increasing need for a solution to the problem of non-English speakers, specifically American Indian children, to perform satisfactorily in school. From Alaska to the southern tip of Florida, many of the American Indian children attending Bureau of Indian Affairs' schools are non-English speaking. William H. Kelly states in his 1967 paper. "Current Research on American Indian Education: A Critical Review of Selected Ongoing Studies," that "most Indian students either do not speak English before entering school or are seriously deficient in their knowledge of English." This deficiency in English becomes a major disadvantage in Bureau of Indian Affairs' schools where the American Indian child must study and respond in English. Consequently, it is extremely important to be able to measure the level of proficiency in English for each American Indian child. Studies by Peterson (1948), Anderson (1953), and Coombs (1958) showed that the performance of the American Indian child on standard tests of reading, vocabulary and language was generally lower than that of non-Indians.

All previous attempts, i.e. Stanford Achievement Test, California Achievement Test, failed in this respect because they are not designed to measure linguistic skills. and the norms and standards are derived from populations far different from the American Indian children. Furthermore, the study of Havighurst (1957) strongly indicated that the types of tests which require facility in English tend to discriminate against the American Indian child who does not learn English at home. As a result, any attempt to use existing standardized tests to measure the linguistic skills of the American Indian are biased.

ANY ATTEMPTS TO USE EXISTING STANDARDIZED TESTS TO MEASURE THE LINGUISTIC SKILLS OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN ARE BIASED.

Clearly, the American Indian child's deficiency in English will prove to be a great disadvantage not only to his overall achievement test performance but also to his classroom performance since all subjects require a fairly sound command of English. This Indian child often needs special training in English as a second language. It is therefore important to identify the child attending Bureau of Indian Affairs' schools who require special training versus the one who does not. Hopkins (1957) in reviewing the type of testing which has been done with North American Indians, suggests that there is a need for a testing instrument which will identify the child who needs ESL training.

In general, the Bureau of Indian Affairs has been interested in the investigation of the language problems and is interested in developing meaningful innovations in methods and materials that are based on empirical evidence. Aware of the problems existing because of the use of English in Bureau of Indian Affairs' schools, Charles N. Zellers, Assistant Commissioner of Education for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, has called for an instrument to assist teachers and administrators in identifying language problems and finding effective solutions.

☐ THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TESTING PROJECT

The purpose of the English Language Testing Project, directed by Dr. Eugène J. Brière, Associate Professor of Linguistics at the University of Southern California, is to develop a set of testing instruments that will determine the level of proficiency in English for the American Indian child so he can be placed in the proper level of instruction in school which will give him the greatest opportunity for academic success. In addition to measuring the active skills of speaking and writing, passive skills such as listening comprehension are being tested. Six different techniques are being developed to measure the knowledge of specific grammatical categories determined by psycholinguists as being necessary for having a fluent command of English.

When the final forms of the various tests in the battery are completed, norms and standards for the various populations will be determined. The tests should not only place the child along a continuum of proficiency in English but will also clearly indicate the children who must have varying degrees of training in English as a second language.

In addition the battery of tests will provide diagnostic information concerning the specific English language needs of each child for teachers and administrators. This will be a definite aid in determining the methods and materials to be used for each specific group.

The major objectives of this project are to develop a battery of tests, consisting of three parts, specifically designed to measure the level of English proficiency of the American Indian child. One part of the test battery will consist of three oral/aural techniques designed to measure the level of proficiency in perception and production of spoken English. A second part of the battery will contain two techniques for testing proficiency in listening comprehension. The third part of the battery will be a paper and pencil test designed to measure the level of proficiency in written English grammar.

These general objectives will require a three-year project, (the first year of which has already been completed) which will be phased in the following manner:

a. The first year was devoted to planning and developing pre-tests and techniques.
b. The second year will be spent in developing final form instruments based on the data gathered in the first and second years.
c. The third year will be devoted to standardizing and normalizing the tests specifically for the American Indian child.

THE PROJECT IS DEVELOPING A BATTERY OF TESTS SPECIFICALLY DESIGNED TO MEASURE THE LEVEL OF ENGLISH PROFICIENCY OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN CHILD.

☐ DESCRIPTION OF TESTS

The following different test forms are being developed to meet the objectives just described.

A written multiple choice test consisting of two different parallel forms is designed to test 53 basic grammatical categories. The items all have three choices and are of two types. In one type the stem is in the form of a question and the choices are in the form of answers. In the second type, the stem is in the form of an incomplete sentence (i.e. a sentence with a blank in it) and the choices are in the form of words or phrases to be filled in. Both types require knowledge of the specific grammatical category being tested in order to answer the item correctly.

Example: Type 1: What color is the pencil?

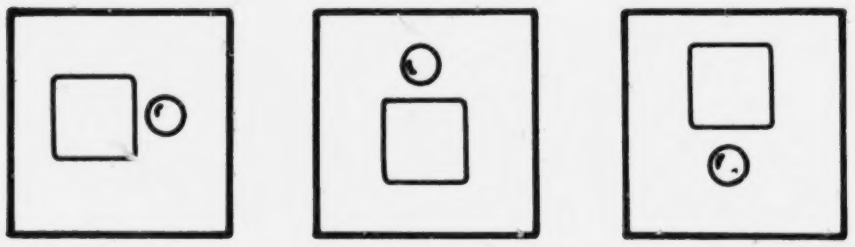
a) It's yellow.
b) The yellow pencil.
c) Yes, it's a pencil.

Type 2: John isn't as____as Rose.

a) tallest.
b) tall.
c) taller.

Both listening comprehension tests consist of taped stimuli that the children hear and some form of non-oral response. One test involves a single stimulus sentence per item and three pictures as the response choices. The child hears the stimulus sentence, then decides which of the three pictures best illustrates that sentence by marking an "X" through that picture.

Example: The child hears the sentence "The ball's under the box."



1. 2. 3.

He must then mark an "X" through picture 3.

The other listening comprehension test involves short conversations between two people. For each item, the child hears a taped conversation. He then hears a question about the conversation and three possible answers. Both the question and the answers appear in written form in his answer booklet. The reason for taping the questions and answers is to reduce a child's chances of missing a question due to poor reading ability. Having heard the question and possible answers, the child marks his choice in the answer booklet.

Example: Conversation:

A. "Why don't you take the broom and sweep up over there John . . . under the desk?"
B. "O.K. Do I get to erase the blackboard too?"
C. "Sure."

Question:

Where did this conversation probably take place?

a) In a classroom.
b) In a market.
c) In a movie theater.

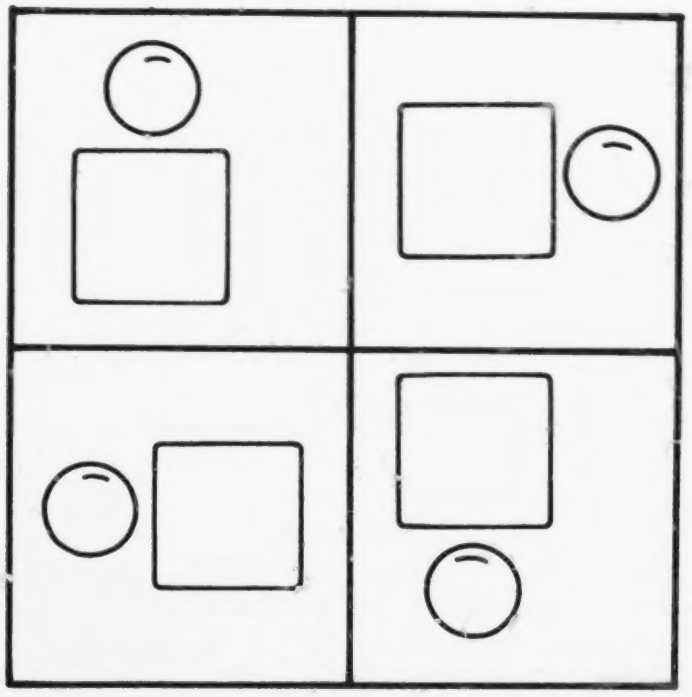
The battery of oral tests is designed to determine the child's speaking ability. Three types of tests are involved. They are;

1) Repetition: the child simply repeats a sentence that the examiner says first.

   Example: The dog that got lost came back today.

2) Transformation: The child changes a given sentence to a related structure. For example, he is asked to make a positive sentence negative.
   Example: Examiner: "He knows how to play that game."
   Child: "He doesn't know how to play that game."

3) Picture Description: The child is shown a set of four related pictures and then shown a picture that is exactly like one of the four. He must point to the correct picture and then tell how that picture is different from the rest.



All responses in this oral battery are tape recorded and later analyzed by our staff.

The repetition and transformation tests are presently judged on the basis of accuracy of reply. On the picture description test, the responses are judged on the basis of grammaticality, appropriateness of vocabulary, and ability to distinguish the target picture from the other three. In the case of the listening tests and written multiple choice tests, responses are either right or wrong.

Revision in the test materials are made after the test results are analyzed after each administration. Individual test results and other pertinent data, such as teacher grades and scores on standardized tests, like the California Achievement Test, are analyzed and correlated through the use of an IBM computer.

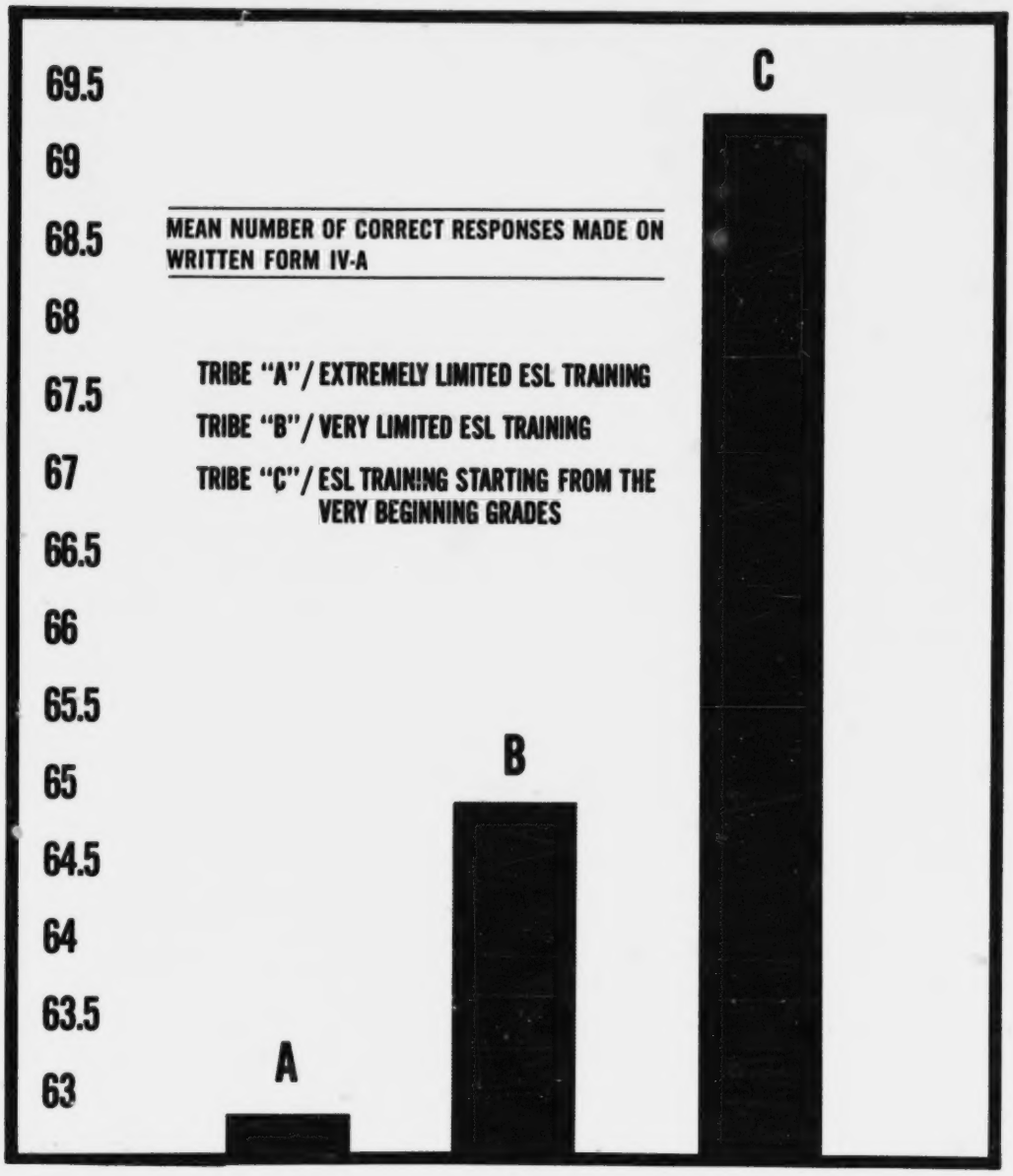
The experimental tests are being administered to five sample American Indian populations in the United States. These populations comprise five different language groups: Choctaw, Eskimo, Hopi, Navajo and Sioux. Before the tests are given to the Indian children, they are pre-tested with groups of Mexican-American children and native speakers of American English at comparable grade levels of the American Indian group. The tests, revised on the basis of these preliminary data, are then administered to the Indian children.

Throughout the months of September and October 1968, 500 children from grades three through seven were tested on the oral tests and 735 were tested on the written tests. In April and May of 1969, revised experimental tests were administered to a total of 720 children from the same five tribes. This represents a total sample population of 1477 American Indian children tested in grades three through seven. In addition approximately 920 native speakers of American English and native speakers of Spanish were tested in our pre-test samples.

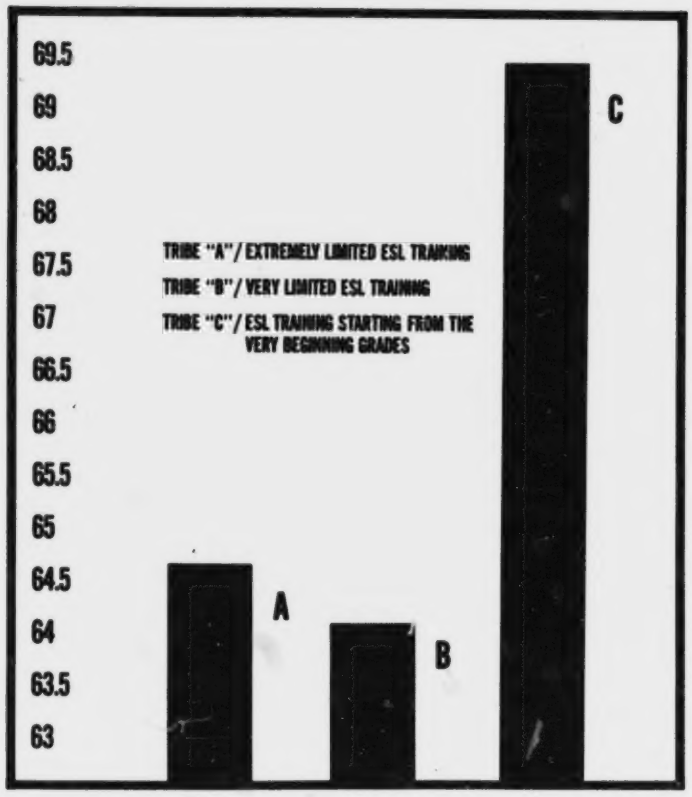
☐ TESTING RESULTS

One of the most obvious discoveries was that children who attend Bureau of Indian Affairs' schools which have an English as a second language (ESL) program operating in the very beginning grade levels score significantly higher than children who attend Bureau of Indian Affairs' schools where there is a very limited ESL program or an ESL program that does not start until grade nine or later. (Three charts below).

On the basis of correlations within specific parts of the battery and across different parts of the battery, it is obvious that our different instruments are indeed measuring different skills.

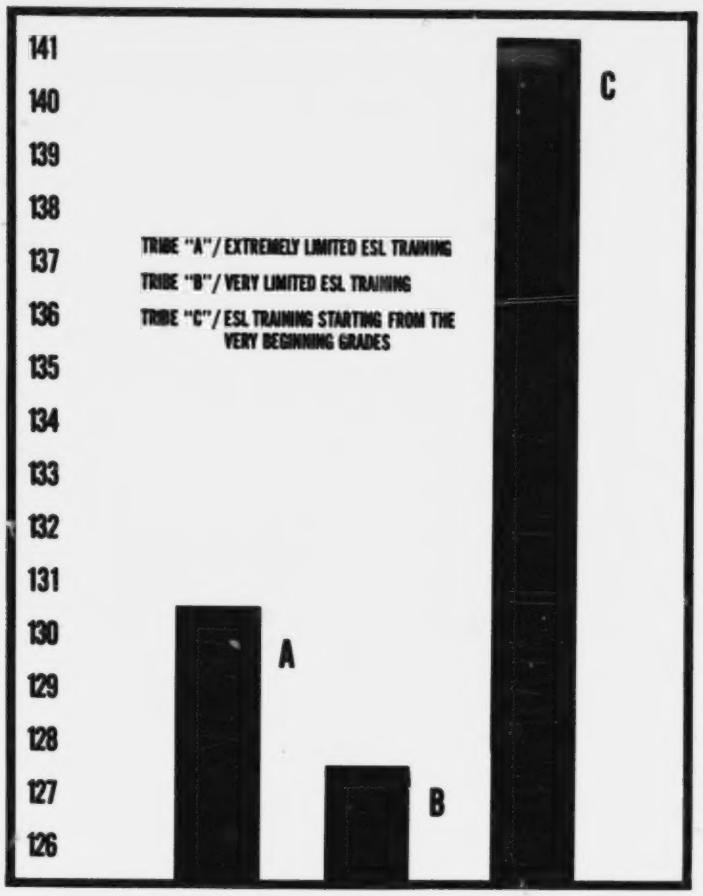


In each of the charts shown, Tribe "A" has had extremely limited ESL training; Tribe "B" has had very limited ESL training; and Tribe "C" has had ESL training starting from the very beginning grades. The scores made by Tribe "C" were statistically significantly better than the other two tribes shown on these charts at a significance level which is better than .008.



MEAN NUMBER OF CORRECT RESPONSES MADE ON WRITTEN FORM III-A

MEAN NUMBER OF CORRECT RESPONSES MADE ON REPETITION FORM RT-B



TEACHERS' INTUITIVE RATINGS OF ENGLISH PROFICIENCY DO NOT CORRELATE WELL WITH ACTUAL TEST SCORES.

It is interesting to note that the intuitive ratings made by teachers of the children's proficiency in English do not correlate very well with scores made on our tests or with scores made on standardized tests. In other words, the tests being developed by the English Language Testing Project will help avoid errors in placement that are currently frequently made on impressionistic judgements rather than on empirical evidence.

By the end of the third year, the diagnostic information concerning specific grammatical categories that will be available to teachers and administrators should prove invaluable in helping to write or select proper materials and more efficient teaching methods for each specific group.

☐ CONCLUSION

This project is in the process of developing a set of instruments to measure the level of proficiency in English of the American Indian child attending Bureau of Indian Affairs' school.

The first tentative experimental results have been most gratifying and on the advice of our board of consultants (representing the disciplines of tests and measurements, linguistics, psychology, computer science, and cross cultural education), we feel that we can develop a battery of tests that will be extremely useful in planning for the total education of the Amerindian school child.

Although not specifically within the scope of this project, it is felt that the testing instruments being developed will be of great use in assessing proficiency in English for other non-English speaking groups and disadvantaged groups in the United States.

THE FINAL BATTERY OF TESTS WILL BE EXTREMELY USEFUL IN PLANNING FOR THE TOTAL EDUCATION OF THE AMERINDIAN SCHOOL CHILD.

The principal investigator has had experience in teaching English as a second language, psycholinguistics, linguistics and language testing. His recent work for the last five years has been in the field of testing languages at the phonological and morpho-syntactic levels. A brief bibliography follows:

Eugène J. Brière, Director. Ph.D. in language and Language Learning. University of Washington, 1964. Associate Professor of Linguistics, University of Southern California: teaches courses in general linguistics and graduate seminars in experimental linguistics, language testing, psycholinguistics and TESOL methodology. Member of the editorial boards of *Language*, the *TESOL Quarterly*, and *Modern Language Journal*, former Chairman of the General Linguistics Section of the MLA. Author of several articles dealing with language acquisition and language testing appearing in *Language, Language Learning, International Journal of American Linguistics, International Review of Applied Linguistics* and *English Teaching Forum.* His book, *A Psycholinguistic Investigation of Phonological Interference*, Mouton and Co., January 1968, deals with problems in phonological testing. He has just completed a project which developed achievement tests in English, based on the Fries-Rojas materials, for the Navajo Area Agency.

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